

11-2006

Unilever's Michael Polk: It's All about 'Dislocating Ideas'

Knowledge@SMU

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/ksmu>

Part of the [Marketing Commons](#)

Citation

Knowledge@SMU. Unilever's Michael Polk: It's All about 'Dislocating Ideas'. (2006). Knowledge@SMU.

Available at: <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/ksmu/326>

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Research & Tech Transfer at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Knowledge@SMU by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email libIR@smu.edu.sg.

(<http://knowledge.smu.edu.sg>)

Unilever's Michael Polk: It's All about 'Dislocating Ideas'

Published: November 15, 2006 in Knowledge@SMU

To drive home the subject of his speech at the recent third annual Wharton Marketing Conference, Michael Polk, president of Unilever United States, flashed up a definition straight from the dictionary: 'Innovation: a new idea or method; a change in something established.' 'It's not invention.... It's innovation' that is at the heart of successful marketing campaigns, Polk said. It's all about coming up with "dislocating ideas" that "disrupt the norm in a category."

He used the example of Unilever's Dove "Campaign for Real Beauty," which debunks the traditional notion of physical beauty and replaces it with a message of self esteem and confidence. Good marketing initiatives, like the Dove campaign, succeed because they "change the status quo" in a category, he suggested. Polk shared his philosophy of marketing in a keynote address at the conference whose theme was "Leading Change through Innovation."

A Mission to Streamline

Polk, who is also group vice president for Unilever, is well positioned to talk about innovation. He leads an impressive portfolio of household brands that includes Dove, Vaseline, Lipton, Axe, Slim-Fast, Country Crock, Wishbone and Q-Tips. With \$50 billion in global revenues and 209,000 employees in 150 countries, Unilever ranks third worldwide in the consumer packaged goods (CPG) industry, Polk said. Though its roots are in Europe, Unilever has a sizable U.S. presence, with revenues totaling nearly \$10 billion and a workforce of 15,000 people in 66 locations, including headquarters in Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Polk joined the company in 2003 after 16 years at Kraft Foods, where he helped lead the integration of Nabisco and Kraft. In moving to Unilever, he joined a company that also was changing. "We have been on a mission over the past five years to streamline" the product lineup, Polk said. Between 2000 and 2005, Unilever's product categories declined from 17 to 11, and its brands went from 113 to 59. Even so, the company still has many brands with long histories, including Pond's skin products, which first began in 1846, and Hellmann's mayonnaise, which originated in 1905.

Polk said the diverse mix of food, hygiene and personal care items in Unilever's portfolio all revolve around the company's goal of helping people "look good, feel good and get more out of life.... It really is what we do. When we come to work in the morning, people really do think this way." For home products sold in this country, "it's all about simplifying life," Polk added, whereas in the developing world, "it's all about making life safer." Soap, for instance, isn't just about getting clean; it plays a critical role in stemming the spread of disease. In India, he noted, "every 10 seconds a child dies of dehydration because of diarrhea."

According to Polk, it is critical for companies today to develop a world-class "tri-lingual organization" fluent in the "languages" of the consumer, the customer and the company. "What you are doing is translating your agenda into the language of the person who has to execute it," namely the retailer who sells the product. He likes to think of Unilever as an "import-export business," with some good product ideas hatched in Europe or elsewhere and then exported to the United States, or vice-versa. Axe body wash, for one, was a hit in Europe well before Unilever brought it to the U.S. market.

Companies such as Unilever are operating in a rapidly changing marketplace, Polk said, with "technology shrinking the world ... and economic power shifting to Asia." On top of that, traditional societal models, such as family structures, are changing, and there is "pervasive insecurity" among consumers in the post-9/11 world. "There are big consumer trends out there that ideas need to be filtered through," he noted, listing some of them: experimental society (enriching life); individualism (solutions for me); a need to belong (getting connected); complexity (simplify my life); anything goes; physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing; securing a better world (environmental) and trading up and down.

Some themes seem contradictory, such as individualism and a need to belong. But it all depends on the product and the circumstances. "People are trading up and trading down," Polk said. The fascination with luxury, high-end goods speaks to the trading-up trend. But in countries where inflation is an issue, like Brazil, people "may be willing to purchase a lower-quality detergent" at a lower price in order to be able to afford other things, like cell phones.

Getting the Right Data

Polk outlined his formula for driving "category growth," stressing that it's not just about beating up the competition. Marketers need to have crystal-clear consumer insight ("good data, the right data is important"); concepts that

change the frame of reference and expand category relevance; brands that take a point of view, and ideas that stretch the value proposition. A key to success is understanding "not just the way people say they will behave, but how they actually will behave," he said.

Polk complimented Starbucks, Apple and 3M for exemplifying the spirit of innovation by offering solutions that "change the consumer and the marketplace status quo." Starbucks, for example, "changed the rules on coffee." The Dove marketing campaign likewise works, because it hinges on a "dislocating idea," he said, adding that "90% of women are not happy with the way they look," and they are frustrated with the way beauty is portrayed in our society. Not everyone buys into Dove's inner-beauty message, promoted by real women with real curves, but that's okay, "because the folks who get it, really do get it and it is meaningful."

He showed a clip of a Dove commercial in which one little girl hates her freckles, another thinks she's ugly, a dark-haired girl wishes she were blonde, and yet another girl thinks she's fat. The images are coupled with the song lyrics, "True colors shining through." "I've got four girls," Polk said. "Every time I get choked up on that."

He cited Country Crock side dishes as another example of using insight to drive business in a marketplace where more and more women work outside the home and families are starved for time. First insight: "Fewer dinners are cooked at home, but 80% are still eaten at home." Second insight: "Everyday meals are more special when Mom can serve homemade family favorites, but she doesn't have time."

Rather than ceding business to fast-food places, delis and restaurants, the goal is to "bring the dollars back to the grocery store..." Polk said. "Comfort food, food consumed at home, has never been as important as it is today." With that thinking in mind, Unilever moved beyond the spreadable margarine business and launched Country Crock side dishes in late 2004, including ready-to-eat mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese. "Think of Boston Market at home," he said.

Lipton Tea Party


Polk offered two more examples of marketing efforts that "change people's perception of a category." Unilever doesn't market Lipton tea simply as tea. Instead, tea is portrayed as a healthy beverage, loaded with antioxidants. The campaign to make people think differently about tea is working, Polk noted. Not only are Lipton sales up, but just as important, sales in the overall tea category have risen.


Polk said Unilever has also managed to "change the conversation" with Axe, the male body spray he referred to earlier that was introduced in the U.S. in 2003. Traditionally, deodorant was promoted for its ability to control sweating and eliminate odor, but the Axe campaign is based on an entirely different premise: "It's about giving guys the confidence to get the girl." He showed an Axe commercial in which a man on a beach is descended upon by a horde of voluptuous, bikini-clad women emerging from the waves. "Spray more, get more" is an Axe motto. According to Polk, "It's about poking fun at the challenge guys have in putting themselves out there."

The Axe marketing campaign (the product line recently added shower gel and body wash) also shows the multi-media approach that marketing campaigns can adopt. Unilever took advantage of the Internet, where young men spend a lot of time promoting Axe through "Webisodes" featuring the escapades of two characters named Evan and Gareth. Other avenues of promotion: an MTV show, video games and video on demand.

The next "big play" for Unilever, Polk said, involves marketing Sunsilk hair products, introduced in this country this past summer after popularity abroad. Consumers will get to know Katie, who is 25 years old and in that "between" phase of life typical of her age group -- between universities, between jobs, between guys. For Katie, hair represents a "daily, harassing challenge."

Polk, who earned a B.S. from Cornell and an MBA from Harvard Business School, said that being a marketer has never been more exciting. "[This] is the most fun I've ever had because the opportunities and the playground are bigger than they have been for a long time."

 [back to top \(#top\)](#)

 [back to top \(#top\)](#)